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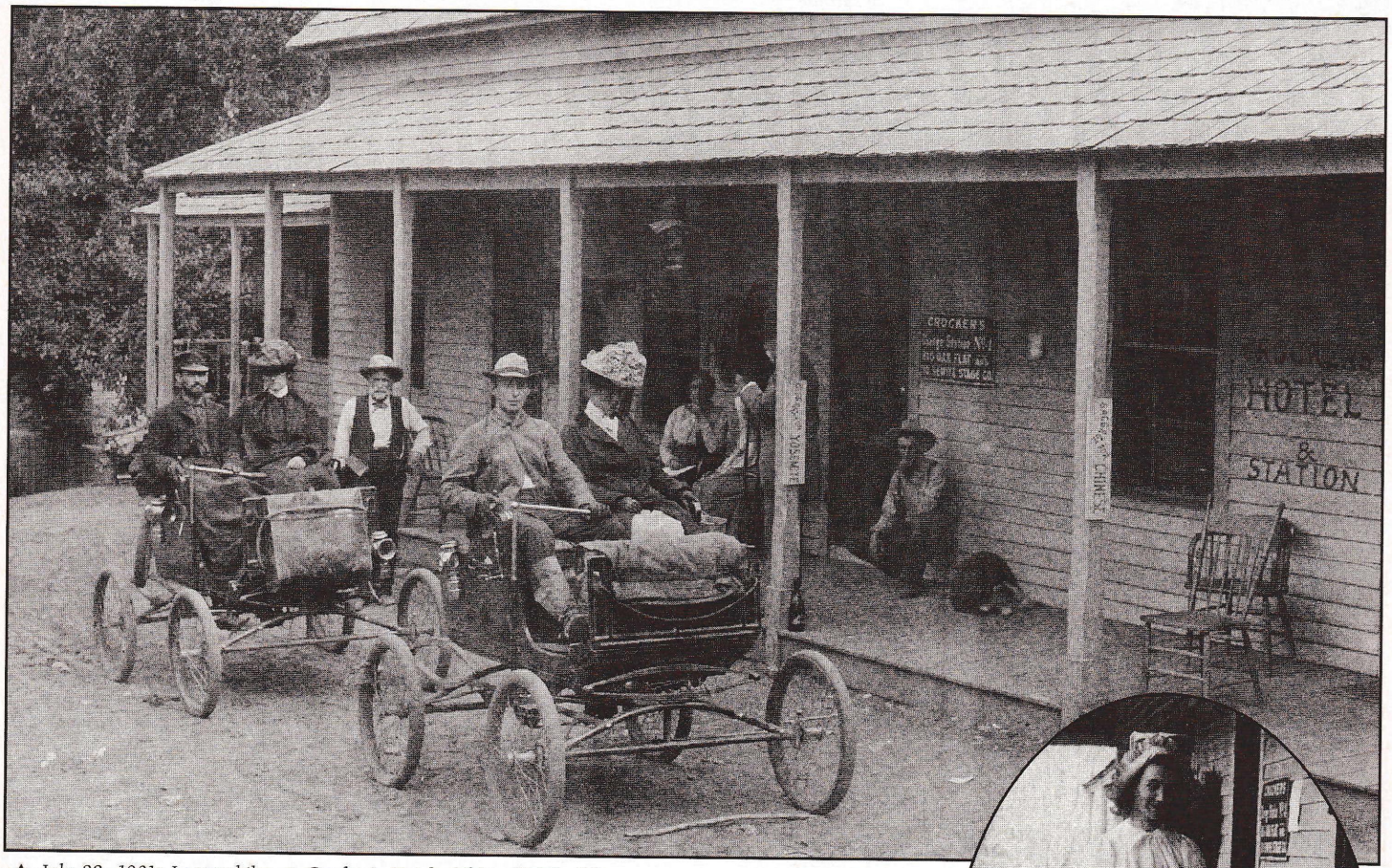
THOMPSONS, CROCKERS & THEIR SIERRA RESORT

By Ralph Lea & Lucy Reller



▲ *July 22, 1901: Locomobiles at Crocker's Hotel: Atkins, Bairds, Miostas, Irene Hall and Nieces.*

Celia May Crocker, Crocker's 1902 ▶

Two people who contributed to the betterment of Lodi were Celia May and Wilson Henry Thompson. Mr. Thompson moved to the Lodi area in 1878 and Celia (Crocker) Thompson moved to Lodi after their marriage in 1903. Wilson Henry was well known in the community but not everyone knew of Celia May (Crocker) Thompson's early work, recording in photography the events and scenes of early life in the Mother Lode. From Sonora to Yosemite and her early home at Crocker's Hotel and Station, Celia photographed it all.

Henry Robinson Crocker was born March 30, 1827 in Massachusetts, a direct descendent of the Governor of Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts from 1681 to 1692. Crocker shipped aboard a whaler when still under age. He later became first mate of a whaling ship.

▲ *Crocker's, July 11, 1901.*

Yosemite Indian, 1899 ▶

In April 1853 Henry Crocker, age 26, arrived in San Francisco and immediately went to the mines around Sonora and Big Oak Flat.

Crocker moved to the Santa Maria mining region. Here he engaged in placer mining and acquired a quartz claim filed on one hundred and sixty acres of timber and meadow land which later became the famous Crocker Hotel and Station on the Big Oak Flat Road.

In 1880 Celia's parents built "Crocker's Sierra Resort" containing 15 buildings.

Crocker's Station was first a luncheon stop for stage passengers on the way to Yosemite, 23 miles beyond.

Stages from Milton in Calaveras County, was the terminus of the Stockton Southern Pacific Railroad. Horses were changed every twelve or fifteen miles, with overnight stops at Solinsky's at Chinese Camp, Priest's Hotel or Crocker's Station.

In a short time Crocker's was open for private conveyances, boarders and campers. Cottages were built, barns added and a new hotel in 1887. Crocker's was 17 miles from Hetch Hetchy Valley and sixty miles from Tioga. It was the headquarters for the building of the Tioga Road that began a short distance away. Crocker's had a Chinese store to supply the many Chinese laborers working on the road.

For several years Crocker's was four miles inside the Yosemite National Park. A camp for detachments of the United States Cavalry was located at Rush Creek next to Crocker's.

Crocker's vied with Priest's Station as the most important stop during the days of the stage coach. Their famous meals were served family style, with white table cloths. They served roasts, racks of venison or lamb, trout, chicken and beef. Homemade mince, gooseberry, squash, cherry, peach and apple pies completed the menu.

Well-known names such as Joseph LeConte, John Muir, J.M. Hutchings, Herbert Hoover and others showed on the register. The Indians came from the Miwok Rancheria to visit Henry, making the twenty-five mile trip on foot. Old Grizzly, head of the tribe was a frequent visitor. He was horribly scared as a result of slight miscalculations during his many bear hunts. Mr. Crocker always fed him and he was one hundred years old when he died in 1903.

The younger Miwok women came to Crocker's Meadow for the choice herbs found there. The Indians of Mono County also came to Crocker's, walking over the Sierras to see Henry, usually bearing tokens of affection – fish. The fish were caught on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada and carried for a day or two tucked into the scanty attire of the Indians.

They also brought koo-cha-bef, (dried larvae of flies), relished because it was salty. Henry Crocker received their gifts, gave them large amounts to eat in return and disposed of the fish and larvae at a later time.

▲ *May and Henry Crocker, August 31, 1894.*

▲ *John Muir, writer and J.P. Lukens, Mayor of Pasadena, August 21, 1895.*

Miwok Rancheria, north of Groveland, was a branch of the Mokelumnes.

The land at Crocker's sloped down to the south fork of the Tuolumne River. Tiger and leopard lilies grew on the slope and were used to decorate the dining tables. The paths were always raked of dry leaves and cleared away. Fire was one of the few things they feared.

Yosemite National Park was created October, 1890. The Secretary of the Interior sent a troop of cavalry to keep out sheep and loose stock.

In 1897, with the construction of the Sierra Railroad from Oakdale to Sonora, (with a stop at Chinese Station), Yosemite passengers could ride the railroad from Stockton or even Lodi.

July 19, 1915 Tuolumne County bought the Big Oak Flat and Yosemite toll road for $10,000 and deeded it to the State of California.

Automobiles were permitted to enter Yosemite Park via Big Oak Flat starting in 1914.

When Crocker's Station was no longer used, some of the smaller buildings were moved over the mountain to Carl Inn.

Wilson Henry Thompson was born September 27, 1868 near Lawrence, Kansas. A son of John and Catherine (Shank) Thompson the family of seven moved to California in 1874 and three years later purchased 160 acres four miles northwest of Woodbridge. This became the family farm where grapes, grain and fruit trees grew.

Wilson Henry completed his local schooling with a three-year course in business at Woodbridge College. After graduating in 1889, his first job was as a clerk at Bentley's General Store.

He became a successful businessman by his own individual effort, rising from the bottom rung of the ladder of life after years of honest endeavor and well-directed energy. He acquired affluence, a rich experience and became a leader in the affairs of the Lodi community.

Mrs. Magee, Celia Crockers and Miss Desolis. ▲

▲ *Frank Goodinos, Capt. Crocker and Lincoln Goodinos.*

In November 1892, Wilson H. Thompson married Mary Fowler, the daughter of pioneer Lodi farmers, Eliza and Joseph Fowler.

The Thompson's moved to Lodi in 1896 and Wilson Henry started his own grocery store. Three years later he replaced a Mr. Beattie and became the new partner of Frank Beckman in his store on south Sacramento Street.

Mrs. Mary Thompson became quite ill and passed away in February 1900.

Celia May Crocker was born, raised and schooled at Crocker Station. At age twenty she attended San Joaquin

▲ *Crocker's, July 11, 1901.*

▲ *Priest's Hotel.*

Valley College at Woodbridge. There she met her future husband, W. Henry Thompson. He visited Crocker's often as Celia's pictures of 1901 and 1902 record. They were married December 9, 1903 at Sunset Point, a short distance from her home at Crocker's Station.

The Thompsons lived at 300 W. Oak Street, then 15 W. Walnut, and finally the northwest corner of Pine and Hutchins Streets.

In February 1904, Hilliard E. Welch, bookkeeper for Thompson and Beckman became the third partner. They were incorporated as Beckman, Welch and Thompson. The modest Thompson was the president of the company with a business second to none in the whole county. In 1910 W.H. Thompson and others started the Pacific Fruit Exchange in Sacramento. Henry became vice president of the company and manager of the Lodi Plant.

W. Henry was a good businessman. He had the future of Lodi in mind when he purchased three of the corner lots at School and Oak streets. He then resold the lots to the newly formed Lodi Improvements Company, of which he was a large investor.

Two story brick buildings were built on the southern corners. The southeast corner housed the J.C. Penney Company and the southwest corner was the second location for Sam Zimmerman's Drug Store. The northwest corner, former home of the Methodist Church, became the new Citizens National Bank, with Thompson as vice president. When the Citizens Bank became the Bank of America, Henry put his efforts toward the Farmers and Merchants Bank where he was a director at the time of his death.

Thompson belonged to most of the Lodi benevolent organizations, and was a charter member of the Lodi Rotary Club. He also engaged in many enterprises for the development of Lodi, regardless of pecuniary benefits to himself. W. Henry Thompson served 51 years on the Lodi Library Board. He was president of that group for 46 years. The downstairs room of the original library was dedicated and named in 1952 for Thompson. He died in the fall of the following year at the age of 85.

The toll for the Big Oak Flat and Yosemite Turnpike Road was $1.00 for each passenger on the stage, horseback or private vehicle on the way to Yosemite. If you only went as far as Crocker's, the cost was 50¢.

When the snow got deep in winter, the mail arrived once a week. Sometimes the mail was delivered by a

The big oak, 12 feet in diameter, early symbol of Big Oak Flat. Protected by town ordinance, the greedy miners worked all one dark night removing the gold rich earth around the tree, to be panned in private. The tree died as a result, destroyed by fire in 1901, but not forgotten.

Celia Thompson Photo

Big Oak Flat, March 15, 1897; Mrs. Watson and Lizzie Fisher. ▲

▲ *Crocker's upper cottage, January 18, 1890; Mr. Crocker, son John and Mr. Beals.*

mail carrier wearing snow shoes. Twenty to one hundred and sixty inches of snow would fall in the area each year.

In June of 1871 the Central Pacific Railroad completed the Copperopolis short line to Milton from Stockton. You would then take a stage to Chinese Camp onto Tamarack Flat and then Jim Hutchings' string of saddle mules to Yosemite.

After traveling past Priest's Hotel and Groveland there was a shortage of places to stay. Hodgson's Ranch was two miles past Crocker's, at the end of the toll road just shy of Yosemite Park boundary.

May Hall was born September 2, 1846 in Pennsylvania. Her father was captain of a sailing vessel. In 1854 her parents came to California leaving her to stay with her grandparents. At age 16 May secured a certificate to teach. Her father died so she came to live with her mother and the Woodruff family at Deer Flat, near Big Oak Flat, Tuolumne County and taught school at Groveland.

▼ *Yosemite; Galen Clark and George Fiske.*

June 25, 1901: Crocker's Change Station #1, Big Oak Flat Road, Yosemite Stage Co.; Leno Miller and Jessie Lumsden. ▲

Henry Crocker had grazing land at Deer Flat and was a friend of the Woodruff family. He had his eye on May and proposed. After their marriage on June 4, 1873, they moved to the Crocker cabin. There Celia and younger brother John were born, March 21, 1874 and August 7, 1876.

Celia was born the same year that the Big Oak Flat Road was opened from Chinese Camp to Crocker's home and Yosemite Park.

Neither child attended grammar school but had a governess for seven years after mother's instruction ended. At the age of eighteen Celia Crocker attended San Joaquin Valley College at Woodbridge where she met her future husband, Wilson Thompson.

Yosemite photographer George Fiske encouraged her photographic work which spanned 62 years. She took pictures, developed and printed them in her own darkroom for many years. The 5 x 8 plate camera which she used, produced sharp pictures. She sent to San Francisco for chemicals and supplies, such as gelatin glass negatives, costing $1.25 a dozen and solio (early Kodak) paper. She used a platinum toner to get a reddish-brown print.

Celia recorded her life with pictures, 30 photo albums, 29 scrapbooks of memorabilia, 19 personal diaries, 8 indexes, 1300 negatives, books and miscellaneous items. The Lodi Public Library, San Joaquin County Historical Society and Yosemite Museum have various parts of the collection.

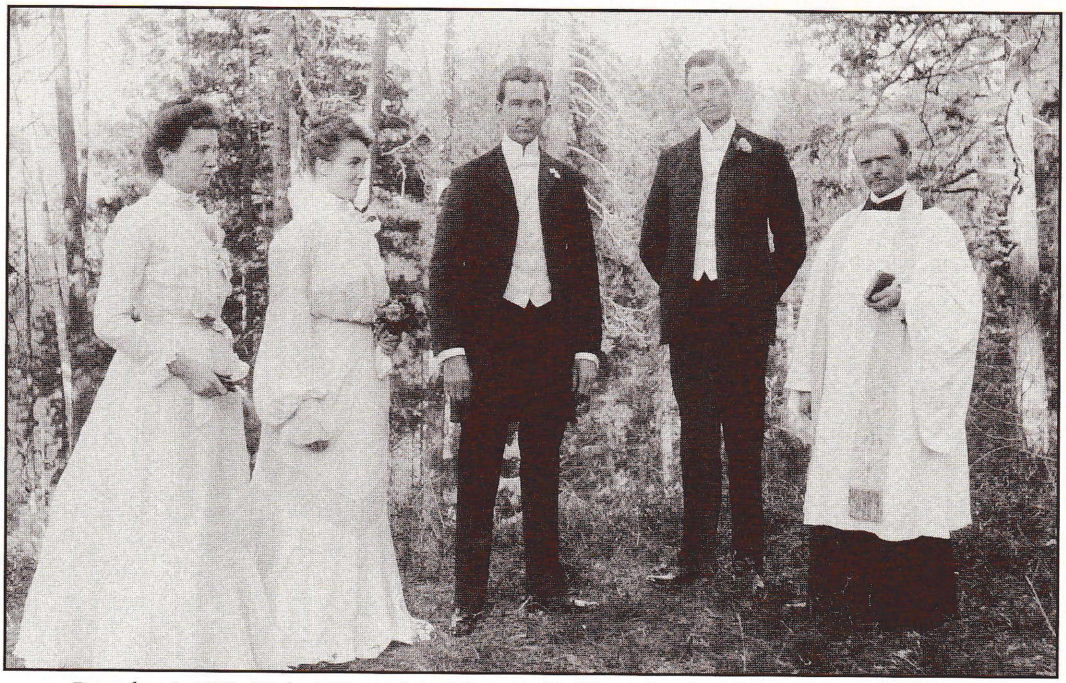
Celia was a charter member of the Lodi Woman's Club, Daughters of the American Revolution, Lodi Chapter Order of Eastern Star, Native Daughters of the Golden West and the First Congregational Church of Lodi. She was the mother of one son, two

Celia Crocker, 1899. ▶

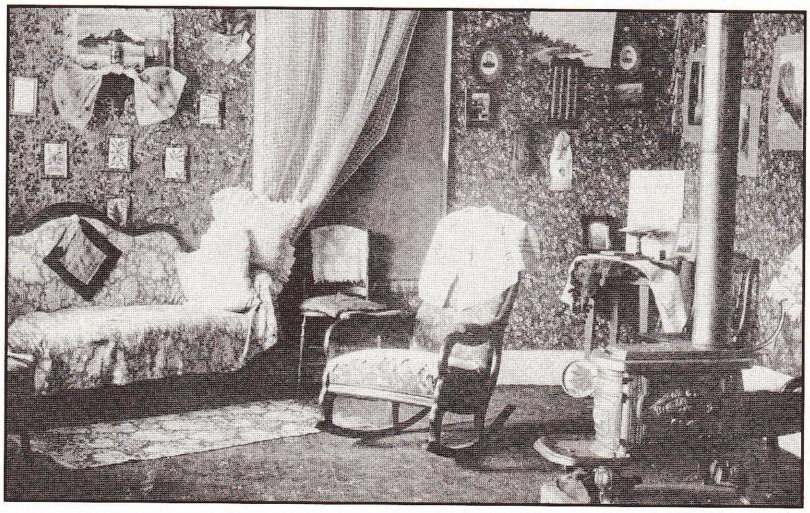
▲ *Making cider at Crocker's Station. Shown are W.H. Thompson, Henry Crocker and Prof. Magee.*

granddaughters and three great-grandchildren at the time of her death in February 1965 at age 90.

Celia's father, Henry R. Crocker, the whaler, miner, hotel owner and friend of the natives of Tuolumne County died May 22, 1904. He is buried in Lodi Cemetery. His wife Mary continued to run Crocker's but it became very difficult. In 1910 Mrs. Crocker sold her beloved home and moved to Lodi to live with her daughter Celia and son-in-law Henry Thompson. For the next twenty five years Mary was active in nature and the preservation of all our natural resources – Redwood League, Sierra Club and Central Valley Council of the State Chamber of Commerce. As a member of the Lodi Woman's Club she promoted and participated in planting shade trees on Cherokee Lane, around city buildings and in the parks of Lodi. She spent her time writing many articles for newspapers and speaking

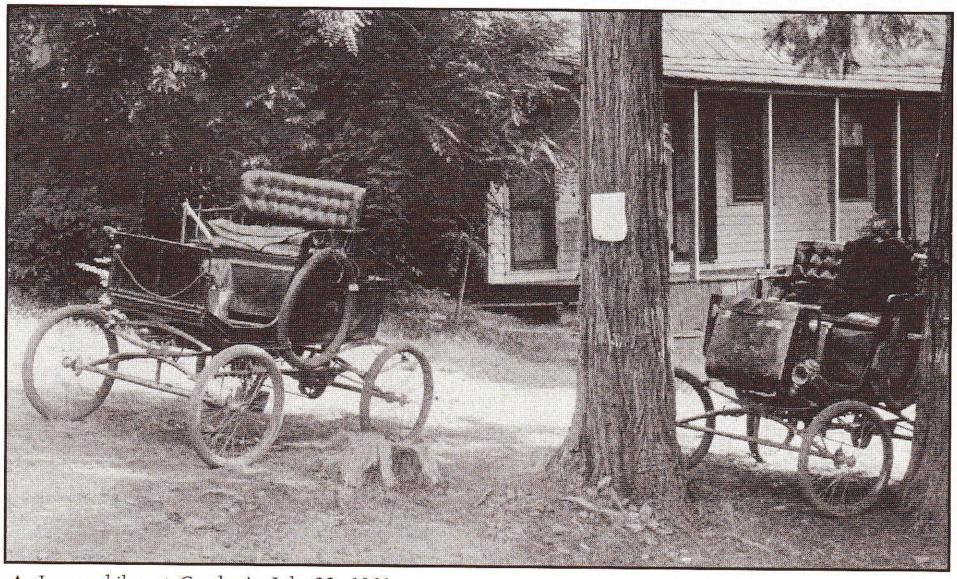


December 9, 1903: Wed at "Sunset Point." Irene Hall, Celia and Wilson Henry Thompson, Hillard Welch and Rev. George Maxwell. ▲



▶ *The parlor at Crocker's Hotel, May 7, 1906.*

▲ *1896; Crocker's Christmas tree.*



▲ *Locomobiles at Crocker's, July 22, 1901.*

▲ *April 5, 1920: May Crocker directing the planting of new trees on the east side of Cherokee Lane near the Mokelumne River bridge.*

▶ *W.H. Thompson house at 300 West Oak Street in Lodi, June 6, 1905.*

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before organizations until her death March 10, 1935.

Crocker Station with over 15 buildings and 160 acres sold for $15,000.00 to Mr. Baker. The grounds and hotel were used for another ten years. The Thompsons and Mrs. Crocker visited Yosemite every year, always stopping to visit the old site. It was hard in later years to view the buildings as they fell into ruin.

Do not worry May, Henry and Celia. Your pictures will preserve this period in California, Yosemite and Lodi history. In spite of your modesty, the accomplishment of your deeds will speak for itself.

REFERENCES

The Big Oak Flat Road
by Paden & Schlichtmann

Diaries, Notes and Newspaper Articles of Celia Thompson

Editor assisted by the professional help of Reference Librarians, Sandy Smith and Behjat Khendegart of Lodi Library and Debbie Mastel at San Joaquin County Museum.

CREDITS

All photos are from the Celia Crocker Thompson collection in the Lodi Public Library, Thompson's scrapbooks, diaries and photo albums in Lodi Library plus glass plate negatives at San Joaquin County Historical Museum. Celia also donated artifacts and photos to the Yosemite Museum.